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## APPROACHES TO RESEARCHING BORDER REGIONS: WRITING THE HISTORY OF LATGALIA<sup>1</sup>



*While there has been increasing interest in the history of border regions in recent years, this has not been accompanied by a growing discussion of theoretical or methodological considerations. Using the case study of Latgalia, this paper aims to shed light on some of the conceptual and practical methodological considerations and challenges inherent in writing the history of border regions. The author argues that the study of the history of border regions necessitates a decentring of national history and a move to transnational (or non/a-nationally construed) history.*

**Keywords:** historiography, historical methodology, border studies, history of borderlands, Latgalia.

## PIEROBEŽAS REĢIONU PĒTNIECĪBAS METODES: LATGALES VĒSTURES RAKSTĪŠANA

*Pēdējos gados ir pieaugusi interese par pierobežas reģionu vēsturi. Tomēr tas nav saistīts ar aktuālo diskusiju par teorētiskajiem un metodoloģiskajiem jautājumiem. Izmantojot Latgales piemēra izpēti, šajā rakstā tiek akcentēti dažādi konceptuālie un praktiskie metodoloģiskie apsvērumi un problēmjautājumi, kas ir raksturīgi, veidojot pierobežas reģionu vēstures aprakstu. Transnacionālā vēsture tiek piedāvāta kā iespējamā alternatīvā pieeja.*

*Pierobežas reģioni bieži vien tradicionālajā historiogrāfijā ir atstāti novārtā vairāku iemeslu dēļ. Pirmkārt, vēsture kā disciplīna attīstījās 19. gs. un bija cieši saistīta ar nacionālisma ideoloģiju. Profesionāli vēsturnieki darīja visu, lai tiktu izveidotas nācijas telpas ar vēsturiski pamatotām nozīmēm, kas veido nāciju kā saskaņotu, nepārtrauktu un diskrētu vienību. Tādējādi pētījums par t. s. atpalikušajiem vai perifērajiem reģioniem lielā mērā bija atstāts novārtā. Otrkārt, ģeopolitiskajām robežām mainoties vēstures gaitā, pierobežas reģioni bieži vien spēlē nozīmīgu lomu dažādu valstu historiogrāfijā. Latgale, piemēram, ir daļa no Latvijas, Polijas–Lietuvas, Baltijas vācu, Krievijas impērijas, padomju, baltkrievu, ebreju un Eiropas vēstures, bet bieži vien tai ir minimāla loma. Pēdējos gados ir bijuši mēģinājumi aplūkot un analizēt šīs tendences, aprakstot pierobežu vēsturi*

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Tomasz Kamusella for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The English name *Latgalia* will be used throughout this paper as an ideologically neutral term.

no ārpuses, izmantojot novadpētniecības pieejas, tomēr nereti skatījums ir pārāk šaurs un lokalizēts un darbā nav saskatāma plašāka vispārpielietojamība vai kādi salīdzinoši elementi ārpus šā reģiona.

Ir arī vairāki praktiski apsvērumi, kas ietekmē rakstītos pierobežas reģionu vēstures avotus. Pirmkārt, daudzvalodība, kas bieži raksturo robežreģionu, nozīmē to, ka pētniekam ir nepieciešams apgūt daudzas valodas, lai pilnīgi izpētītu multietnisko un daudzvalodu reģionu vēsturi. Otrkārt, vietvārdu un personvārdu nosaukumi, kas katrā valodā ir atšķirīgi, norāda pētniekam, kādu metodiku katram no tiem izvēlēties. Visbeidzot, materiāls, ar kuru ir jāstrādā, bieži vien ir sadrumstalots un izkaisīts pa dažādiem arhīviem ārpus reģiona. Tas pētniekam rada ar loģistikusaistītas problēmas, t. i., nepieciešamību pavadīt vairākas stundas ceļā, kā arī birokrātiskas problēmas, pieprasot vīzu, lai pārvietotos pa Šengenā zonā vai ārpus tās.

Raksta autore diskutē par to, vai pētījums par pierobežas reģionu vēsturi rada nepieciešamību pēc valsts vēstures decentralizācijas un pārejas uz transnacionālo (vai ne-nacionāli interpretētu) vēsturi kā domāšanas veidu ārpus valsts vēstures sistēmas un robežām. Starpvalstu vēsture ir perspektīva, nevis metodoloģija tās tiešajā nozīmē. Šāda starptautiska vēsturiskā pieeja pārorientē mūsu telpas un vēstures konceptualizāciju, kad mēs pierobežu vai starpreģionus uztveram nevis kā nacionālās historiogrāfijas perifērijas, bet gan kā svarīgus pieturas punktus kultūras apmaiņā. Piemēram, Daugavpils un Rēzeknes nozīme pieauga 19. gs. otrajā pusē, kad tās kļuva par svarīgiem dzelzceļa līniju krustpunktiem starp Sanktpēterburgu un Varšavu, Maskavu un Rīgu. Izpratne par šiem starptautiskajiem procesiem ir īpaši svarīga, jo, pētot pierobežas reģionus, kas vēsturiski bija multietnisku un starptautisku impēriju daļas, var saprast, ka to robežlīnija vienas valsts robežās ir tikai salīdzinoši nesena parādība.

Noslēgumā ir jāpiebilst, ka, aprakstot pierobežas reģionu vēsturi, pētnieki tiek mudināti ceļot pāri tradicionālās vēsturiskās analīzes robežām un noskaidrot pieņēmumus, uz kuriem tika veidota vēsture kā disciplīna, proti, nacionāla valsts.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** historiogrāfija, vēsturiskā metodoloģija, robežas studijas, pierobežasreģionu vēsture, Latgale.

## Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest among many disciplines in border regions and border studies, which pay increasing attention to people and spaces at the margins (Wilson and Hastings 2005; Wastl-Walter 2011). History has also followed suit, marked by the publication of several edited volumes in recent years specifically on the history of border regions in a comparative context (Kuropka 2010; Bartov and Weitz 2013; Readman et al. 2014). Indeed, Kramer claims, that *the history of borderland regions, peoples and cultural exchanges has become one of the most innovative areas of contemporary historical scholarship* (Kramer 2014: 312). However, while this has been accompanied by much discussion about

the bitter struggles over disputed regions in national historiographies seen as legitimising competing claims of various nationalisms and nation-states (Snyder 2003; Zhurzhenko 2011; Gritsenko & Krylov 2012; Scott 2013), approaches to researching and writing the history of border regions have remained largely under-theorised from a historiographical and methodological perspective. As Kramer continues, *borderlands are geographical, political and social spaces, where lines between cultures become blurred, and this blurring of boundaries extends also to the influence of borderlands history on the familiar categories of historical analysis* (Kramer 2014: 312). Thus, the writing of the history of border regions necessitates a rethinking of some of the basic assumptions we make about writing history.

What follows is a series of reflections on conceptual and practical methodological considerations for researching border regions. This will mainly be a theoretical discussion but the example of Latgale, the region of eastern Latvia, which today borders the Russian Federation, Belarus and Lithuania, will be used to illuminate various points. The first part will discuss the conceptual considerations influencing the study of the border regions, including the somewhat *peripheral* place of borderlands in national historiography, the overlapping national historiographies of a region, which has a shared history with several of today's neighbouring states, and the role of local history approaches. The second part will address some of the practical considerations, including the necessity to master many languages and the dispersal of archival material. Finally, I will argue, that the study of the history of border regions necessitates a decentring of national history and a move towards transnational history. I do not aim to provide concrete *answers*, but rather to share my reflections, raise questions, and inspire further research into this field.

### **Historiographical Traditions of Writing the History of Border Regions**

Traditionally, border regions occupy a somewhat marginal place in the writing of history (Kürti 2001; Batt 2002). The development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of History as a scholarly discipline occurred alongside the emergence of the ideology of nationalism and consequently established itself as a profession, closely linked to the making and legitimising of nation-states. As an *imagined community* (Anderson 1983) historians helped generate national consciousness by investing the space of the nation with historical meanings, which constructed the nation as coherent, continuous and discrete. It was the job of the historian to *discover, recover, forget, re-interpret, mould or construct* this shared past, which formed one of the keystones of national belonging (Sunny 1998: 569).

The national histories, which emerged were written by historians, usually working in the urban centres of power, and the national historical narratives, which emerged, are a reflection of this. Modernisation was equated with nationalism (Gellner 1983), and consequently the study of so-called *backward* or *peripheral* regions was largely neglected (Applegate 1999). Despite Europe, being *very much a continent of regional identities* (Sallnow and Arlett 1989: 9), the geographical

peripherality of the borderland in the imagined *geo-body* (Winichakul 1994) of the nation, was mirrored in the writing of national history. The same can also be said of the different ethnolinguistic groups residing within a state. As Magocsi writes, *Most national histories are misnamed. This is because they are not the histories of a particular state, as they pretend to be, but rather of the dominant or titular nationality associated with a given state* (Magocsi 2004: 121). This is particularly pertinent to borderlands, because they tend to have the highest concentrations of non-titular national (or so-called *minority*) *inhabitants*.

Interest was usually only paid to border regions for two reasons. The first is in the case of legitimisation, whereby a state lays claim to a region. For example, in the period after 1918, Latvian national historiography of Latgalia became a tool for the nationalisation, as well as *Latvianisation*, of the multi-ethnic society of the First Republic of Latvia. History was used as a tool to re-identify the Latgalians as Latvians and emphasis was placed on the national historical heritage (Ivanovs 2009: 79). An example of such projects is the founding of the Latvian Open-Air Ethnographic Museum in 1924 to exhibit the heritage of the historical and ethnographic regions, which make up Latvia. The second was the writing of the history of borderland as an exotic *Other*. As Ivanovs states: *Although the history of Latgalia is considered an integral part of the historiography of Latvia, it has many specific features, which are determined by the historical peculiarities of the region as well as by political and ethnic factors, that call forth such peculiarities* (Ivanovs 2009: 74).

The focus on *peculiarities*, such as the Catholicism, Catholic culture, the Latgalian language (dialect) and the presence of various ethnolinguistic minorities, marginalize Latgalia as it is presented as being out-with the mainstream of Latvian historiography, an orientalist *Other* as seen from the perspective of Riga.

The picture becomes more complex, when we consider that border regions do not only occupy a somewhat peripheral place in national historiographies, but as a result of multiple geo-political border changes over the centuries, play a part in several different national historiographies. Borders and borderlands are important sites for the contestation and re-negotiation of historical narratives and the point of confluence and overlap of different national historiographies and political projects (Zhurzhenko 2011: 4–5). The politics of memory or *memory wars* over border regions has been widely documented elsewhere (Zhurzhenko 2011; Zhurzhenko 2013; Gritsenko & Krylov 2012; Scott 2013). Here, the focus is on the methodological implications of writing the history of a region that belongs to several overlapping historiographies.

The region of Latgalia was historically part of Poland–Lithuania (1569–1772), the Russian Empire (1772–1918), the Republic of Latvia (1918–1940), the Soviet Union (1940–1941; 1944–1991), the Third Reich's war time empire (1941–1944), the restored Republic of Latvia (since 1991) and, since 2004, the European Union. As a result of this, Ivanovs states that: *For a long while investigation of the history of Latgalia was conducted within national historiographic traditions that provided*

*an insight into the Latgalian past as if from outside;*<sup>2</sup> *the history of Latgalia was “incorporated” into historical contexts of other political and cultural formations – the Russian Empire, Poland–Lithuania (Rzeczpospolita), the Soviet Union (Ivanovs 2009: 75).*

Indeed, Latgalia has, in one way or another, formed part of Latvian, Polish–Lithuanian, Baltic German, Russian imperial, Soviet, Belarusian, Jewish and now, since Latvia became a member of the European Union in 2004, European Union history. However, in all these cases, it usually only plays a marginal role.

The history of Latgalia has been incorporated into many different historiographical traditions as a political instrument in support of ideologies of the various political and cultural territorial formations. For example, the Russian imperial historiography of Latgalia tended to justify the incorporation of the Baltic region (including Latgalia) into the Russian empire (Počs and Poča 1993; Ivanovs 2009: 75–76). Moreover, as a remote and peripheral territory in the history of these various political and cultural formations, the history of Latgalia has also been somewhat side-lined to the fringes. Despite the efforts of Polish (or Polish–Lithuanian) researchers such as Gustaw Manteuffel and Kazimierz Bujnicki, *Polish Livonia* is often *forgotten* in the historiography and cultural memory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Zajas 2013; Dybaś 2013). The same is also true of Baltic German historiography of the so-called Livonian period from the 13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ivanovs 2009: 77) as well as the Jewish history of the region. Moreover, the shared history between Latgalia and Belarus, from the period, when the territory of Latgalia formed part of the Vitebsk *gubernia* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the territory, which today forms northwest Belarus, has largely been neglected in the literature. Furthermore, this externalisation of the historiography of Latgalia meant that the indigenous population of Latgalia was not usually the focus of attention. From the vantage of dominant ethnolinguistic nationalisms, borderland populations were seen as *ethnographic mass* without a crystallized national identity, and thus without history, malleable and fair game for a nation-state, that successfully seized a region with the population in question. As a result of these competing historiographical claims, these regions have often been seen as *no place[s]* (Brown 2003), which are not fully covered in any historiographical traditions.

Finally, in recent years there have been attempts to address the tendency to write the history of borderlands from the *outside*, either as part of a national historical narrative of the titular state of which it is currently part or as part of the national historiographies of other states to which it was historically part of. In response, local history approaches have emerged which write the history of the region from *inside*. In the case of Latgalia, this process was begun in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the so-called *First Latgalian Awakening* with figures such as Francis Trasuns (1864–1926) and Francis Kemps (1876–1952). Since 1991, this approach has witnessed a revival with the Rēzekne Higher Education Institute and the Latgale Research Institute at

<sup>2</sup> My emphasis



Daugavpils University coordinating many projects. In addition, there has also been a growth in amateur Latgalian studies (Ivanovs 2009: 82). However, this approach of investigating the region in isolation *per se* actually preserves and supports the detachment of Latgalia from the other historical regions of Latvia and does not take into account cross-border contacts. Often the focus is too narrow, overly localised and the work does not have wider generalizability or any comparative element out with the region.

### Practical Considerations for Writing the History of Border Regions

In addition to the above-mentioned conceptual standpoints, there are several practical considerations which impact on the writing of the history of border regions. The first and foremost challenge presented to a researcher with a multilingual region, such as Latgalia, is language and the multiplicity of scripts. Latvian, Latgalian, Russian, Polish, Ruthenian, Belarusian, Yiddish, Low German and Romani have historically been spoken on the territory of Latgalia. Knowledge of the multiple languages of the region is necessary in order to be able to consider the multiple perspectives on the different periods of history and ethnolinguistic inhabitants and not be reliant on just one national historiography.

Tying in with the previous point about languages, the names of places also present the researcher with methodological decisions. As a result of the changing geopolitical borders in the region, places have been known by different names in different languages throughout their history. Indeed, the very stability of the linguistic forms of place-names to which we are now accustomed is a bureaucratic invention of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, Rēzekne has historically and continues to be known by many different names, including *Rositten* (German), *Резица* (Russian), *עֶצִיטער* (Yiddish), *Rzeżyca* (Polish), *Rėzeknė* (Lithuanian) and *Räisaku* (Estonian). To use the contemporary Latvian name *Rēzekne*, when referring to the town, for example, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, would thus be anachronistic. Historians have attempted to address this issue in two main ways. One way is to employ a chronological strategy. Davies and Moorhouse in their book *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (2002) use the names *Wrotizla*, *Vretslav*, *Presslaw*, *Bresslau*, *Breslau* and *Wroclaw* to reflect the name changes of the city throughout history. Paul Robert Magocsi's *Historical Atlas of Central Europe* (2002) is an excellent resource on the changing place names in different periods, however, unfortunately Magocsi's definition of Central Europe does not include Latvia and Estonia, and these regions are not included within the scope of his atlas. Such an atlas of the Baltic region would be a fruitful project for future research.

However, the limitation of this approach is that, it does not take into account that in multilingual regions, as was the case in much of Central and Eastern Europe, places were often known simultaneously by several different names by different ethno-linguistic groups. For example, Timothy Snyder in *The Reconstruction of Nations* (2003) includes a table at the beginning of his book with place names in

eight different languages. The difference between *Lwow* and *L'viv*, *Wilno* and *Vilnius* imply political implications about whether the city is Polish or Ukrainian or Polish or Lithuanian. Thus, the researcher is faced with the choice of which place name to use either the standard name in the official or administrative language of the time and parenthesize alternate names in other languages where relevant. The same also applies to the names of people. Before the age of nationalism and bureaucracy, literati changed the forms of their names at will in rapport with a given language, in which they happened to write.

Finally, the borderlands or *bloodlands* (Snyder 2011) of Central and Eastern Europe have historically been the site of multiple war fronts, and especially during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During World War I Latgalia was occupied by Germany, after the war it fell under the territorial interests of Latvia Latvian Bolsheviks, Bolshevik Russia and Poland, and later underwent a triple occupation during World War II by the Soviets, Nazis and Soviets (again). In practical terms, this means that much source material about the history of this region has been lost. Moreover, the archival material, that survives, has been widely dispersed, scattered outside the region among archives in Riga, St Petersburg, Moscow and Vitebsk. This presents the researcher with the logistical problem of many hours of travelling and also the bureaucratic hassle of applying for visas to move in or out of the Schengen Area.

## **Alternative Approaches: Moving Beyond National to Transnational History**

The writing of the history of borderlands, such as Latgalia, can be seen as an accumulation of different historiographic traditions, however thus far there has been little work done to integrate these. I suggest, that the writing of the history of border regions necessitates a decentring of national history and a move towards cross-border or transnational history as a means of thinking beyond the framework and boundaries of national histories. Transnational history is a perspective rather than methodology in the strict sense. Such an approach allows historians to study the patterns and dynamics of the flow and movement of objects and people across time and space, crossing borders between nations, states and cultures and opens up the otherwise often fixed entities or containers of history as a spatially confined culture or nation (Assmann 2014).

Such a transnational historical approach re-orientates our conceptualisations of space and history, and rather than seeing borderland or *in-between* regions as *peripherality*, as in national historiography, we can see them as the important points of cultural exchange. As Ther states: *Intermediary spaces cannot be regarded as a peripheral phenomenon of European history.. Precisely their location at the (changing) borders specified a certain centrality, for major traffic arteries and channels of communication ran through them.. From a European perspective Strassbourg or Katowice are more centrally located than Paris or Warsaw* (Ther

2013: 488).

The same could be said of today's Daugavpils and Rēzekne, which grew in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as important junctions on the railway lines between St Petersburg and Warsaw, Moscow and Riga. An understanding of these transnational dynamics is especially important for the study of border regions, which were historically part of multi-ethnic and multinational empires, as their confines within the border of a single nation-state is only a relatively recent phenomenon. Fixed borderlines separating different political entities, jurisdictions, nations, religions etc. are a relatively recent Western invention, epitomized by the early modern principle of absolute sovereignty and the model of territorial state, which was later transformed into the self-contained nation-state. Previously, borders and borderlands were zones of contact, intermingling and overlapping. It was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that these *borderlands* were transformed into *bordered lands* (Zhurzhenko 2010).

Today, with the incorporation of Latvia into the European Union in 2004, the opening of borders and the implementation of visa-free travel within the Schengen countries, we again return to a multinational, re-regionalised Europe (Applegate 1999). *The borders, that ostensibly differentiate human societies actually reveal the diversity, ambiguity and multicausality, that exists everywhere – even in those places that historians have portrayed as coherent, unified or clearly bounded by the categories of historical knowledge* (Kramer 2014: 312).

Writing the history of border regions thus encourages scholars to travel beyond the frontiers of traditional historical analysis and question the very assumptions, on which the discipline of History was founded, namely, the nation-state. There have been encouraging developments in political and cultural spheres, which indicate a shift towards this approach, such as the Latvia–Lithuania–Belarus Cross-Border Cooperation Programme (2007–2013). It is hoped, that historical writing will follow a similar approach.

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